LIBRARIES

Why Public Libraries?

by Malcolm Getz

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Introduction

Libraries 2000, a seminar to re-examine the function and future development of libraries in Alberta, was held in 1983. Many suggestions were made as to how decision makers might be better informed of the value of libraries and how libraries could better inform their publics of services available. A committee consisting of representatives of Alberta Culture, the Alberta Library Board, Alberta Library Trustees Association, Library Association of Alberta and the Learning Resources Council of The Alberta Teachers Association was set up to look into ways of following up on these suggestions, and has commissioned a series of booklets to be produced on topics raised at the seminar.

One suggestion made was that community decision-makers, and librarians, should be reminded that libraries give very good value for the taxpayer's dollars. They provide cost-effective and efficient ways to preserve, organize and circulate information. It was also pointed out that library trustees and librarians need to analyze their services to show how such benefits may be measured.

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Why Public Libraries?

An important part of our humanity derives from the systematic way we record our experiences. We are social creatures and we enjoy sharing the perspectives of others by making contact through books and otherwise. We often depend on the permanent record for making decisions, in evaluating careers, in investing, in voting, in planning travel. More formally, we depend on the strength of the written record to guide science and politics. The richer, more complete, and accessible is the record, the more easily we can enjoy it, use it, and extend it.

A library is one way we can create and manage the record. Books provide the deepest, most varied, most portable and personal access to the human record yet devised. Libraries are often effective and economical ways to bring books together, to preserve them, and to make them accessible to people who want them. Libraries have been playing this role for over 3,000 years, and so are symbols of higher civilization.[1]

However, to recognize that libraries are valuable institutions for our society doesn't tell us how many libraries are best, or what sort of libraries will serve our interests most effectively. Libraries are expensive undertakings. They require sound buildings, meaningful collections, and intelligent management. These are always scarce resources, and so we must make choices about how to invest them. Moreover, even given a decision about the total amount of effort to put into libraries, we still face significant choices about how to design the public library system. The question "Why public libraries for Alberta?" can best be addressed by asking what makes libraries most valuable?

The main alternative to a public library is the personal purchase of books. At retail, good books cost about $20.00 each. Occasionally, one might share a book with a friend and so a book might be read twice. Let's say that's ten dollars per read. A typical well-managed public library will have total costs per circulation of under $3.00. The operating cost per circulation at the Edmonton Public Library in 1984 was $1.80. Inclusion of an appropriate annual value for the capital, the buildings and equipment in the Library, would give a somewhat higher total cost per circulation, but generally much less than $3.00. A circulation may on occasion also involve more than

1. The great library at Alexandria, dating from 200 B.C., is said to have had 700,000 papyrus scrolls. The National Library of Canada, founded in 1953 has 900,000 volumes. The University of Alberta Library, founded in 1908, is the largest library in Alberta and has 2.2 million volumes.

one read. There are other services as well, answering questions, story times for children, and the like so that looking only at circulation understates the value somewhat. Nevertheless, we can be confident that public library services are a very economical alternative to book purchase. Within this general notion, we have the problem of deciding how much and what kind of library service is best.

How Many Libraries?

From Rainbow Lake to Coutts, there are people who read books and love libraries and people who don't. How many libraries are appropriate to serve the interests of the diverse communities across the Province? One could think of a pattern of very small libraries, one in every hamlet with collections of 500 to a few thousand volumes. Such a pattern would have the advantage of being very convenient. The service is likely to be very personal, with collections tailored to the specific interests of the principal readers. However, each library will probably be buying a hundred or fewer new books per year. Little can be afforded beyond very popular works and some reference materials.

Alternatively, one might imagine a pattern of fewer, generally larger libraries, let's say with collections in the tens of thousands, buying several thousand books a year. With this pattern, the interests of more diverse readers can be met more fully. However, such a pattern means that users must make longer trips to get to a library and will find the service more formal.

Of course, other intermediate patterns are conceivable, with a combination of small community locations and regional centres. But the amount of effort we are likely to want to put into libraries is limited, and so more effort in communities is likely to come at the expense of regional centres and vice versa. How can we think about identifying the right mix? How is a balance struck?

Consider the case for creating a particular small library. If the value of services it can provide exceeds the cost, then the case for proceeding with it is likely to be sound. Creating the library will increase the total value of all the library services by more than the cost, and so the net value of the library services will increase. If a major public library facility is nearby, then the value of the community library may be small. Readers with particular interests may prefer to have access to a much larger library to get a better match of material to their reading tastes. Even for those who use the small local library, the value of the handy location may simply be reduced travelling cost to them of not having to go the extra distance to a major centre.

To strike the balance, we will also want to consider what will it cost to operate a local community library. Will volunteer labour make a substantial contribution? Can space be found that has little alternative use? Will someone donate some worthwhile books to establish a base for its collection? If the costs are very low, the community library will make sense even when a much larger library is nearby. If the costs are high, the municipality may decide that a library isn't worth it even if an alternative larger library is too far away to be relevant. Different communities may make different decisions. Municipalities with many people who are avid readers, with a tradition of volunteer effort, with many people without ready transportation, will find a small local library well worth the effort. "Why have a public library in this community?", then, is a question that each community will properly want to address for itself.

From a regional point of view, there are some important alternatives to community public libraries that should also influence local decisions. In some areas, regional or library system headquarters may offer deposit collections, rotation of stock, books-by-mail, and various mobile services. Mail service requires preparation and distribution of a catalogue, perhaps annually. The catalogue involves a heavy fixed cost that must be considered in light of the total volume of mail transactions. Books-by-mail may be cost effective in very rural areas. If the volume is not sufficient, however, book purchase by mail, as from commercial book clubs may be less expensive and more effective. Bookmobiles are frequently less expensive than books by mail and very small local libraries. A predictable monthly visit by a bookmobile can bring several thousand volumes to a community more economically than a books-by-mail service or a local library can. One might even think of a bookmobile with a convenient mail return. Book purchase, deposit collections in local outlets, books-by-mail, bookmobiles, and cooperative, regional library systems, then, are often sensible alternatives to a community developing its own independent, small library.

The choice of whether to have a library then is not necessarily an all-or-nothing choice, but rather a choice among a variety of alternatives. In thinking about the alternatives, a community should be interested in the cost per book borrowed or read for each alternative. One should also be interested in the differences in the service characteristics, the ease of access, and the variety of selection. A public library has often proved to be very valuable, but the choice of having conventional, independent community public libraries in every locale is not necessarily the wisest. A community will enrich itself by selecting the form of public library service that yields services worth as much as possible more than the library costs.

Much the same logic applies in a large system's decision about adding a branch. How many branches are needed to serve a city? The answer will depend on an assessment of the cost of adding an extra

branch versus the value of the extra services the branch would generate. The analysis should also consider the cost and value of services of alternatives, such as relying on fewer, larger library centres with deeper, more varied collections. It is quite possible for a city to be overbranched, having so many small branches, each much like the next, that it cannot afford the larger library centre that can match the reading demands of many more people with extended hours of services at the cost to the readers of more travel. When we can afford only a limited budget for public libraries, we face trade offs among competing services. The most valuable library services can be determined by a careful balancing of the costs and benefits of alternatives.

More Books or More Hours of Service

Let's turn to the question of the character of service to be provided at an established library whether it is a small community library or a major branch in an urban system. To determine the value of a public library, we need to define what services are to be provided. Two principal dimensions of service are the number of hours of service per week and the number of volumes in the collection, or more critically, the number of useful, new volumes added. Within a given annual budget, we could expend more on books if we offered fewer hours of service. Suppose that our library must have two workers present for security reasons in order to be open. An extra hour per week of service using two people will mean about 100 extra hours of staff and added operating overhead cost per year. If all the labour costs of being open an extra hour come to six dollars, the library will have to spend about $600 per year to add one more hour to each week. To add a book to the collection typically costs about $15 for purchase, and perhaps $10 to catalogue and process it into the collection. If a library operated for one less hour each week, it could add about 24 more volumes to the collection in a year. How is the needed balance between books and hours to be struck?

To make the choice, we will want to decide what we want our library to achieve. A community might want to have its library create as many circulations as possible. This goal is reasonable if the books to be circulated are similar and if the users are similar one with another. With this, we have a criterion to judge the balance of hours versus books: create as many circulations as possible given the budget for the library.

Adding hours of service will likely increase circulation by making the library more convenient to users. It is especially helpful if the

library opens regularly during normal business hours, say 40 hours or so per week. Then no one need refer to a schedule to decide whether to try the library. Evening and weekend hours allow persons to come who are occupied during business hours. One can easily get up to 70 hours a week. However, the increased value of an added hour becomes less and less the more hours are offered. Adding the 40th hour may attract, say, 300 extra circulations a year. Adding the 60th hour, may attract 30 extra circulations. Adding the 70th hour, may attract only 10 added circulations. If adding an hour each week costs $600 for the year and the added hour say added 300 extra circulations, then the implicit cost per added circulation is $2. If adding an extra hour brings 30 extra circulations, the extra cost per added circulation is about $20. When only 10 circulations are added, the extra cost per circulation is $60.

Adding more, useful new books will usually attract more circulations. When a library is adding only 100 new titles per year, an added title should be very popular and might attract an added 20 circulations per year. When 1000 new titles are being added, one more title may add only 10 circulations. When 2000 titles are being added per year, an added title may add only 5 circulations. If adding another title costs $25 for purchase and processing, a title that added 20 circulations is costing only an extra $1.25 per circulation. A title that adds 10 circulations is costing $2.50 per extra circulation. A title that adds 5 circulations is costing $5 per extra circulation.

To get as many circulations as possible, we will want to strike a balance between hours and added book titles at the point where the extra cost per circulation is the same for both books and hours. To understand this conclusion, suppose the extra costs are not the same. Suppose we are adding so few titles that one more adds 20 circulations, thus costing only $1.25 per circulation. Suppose we have so many hours that adding another hour per week adds only 10 units of circulation in a year, thus costing $60 per circulation. By cutting back hours by one per week we save $600 and reduce circulation only by 10. By adding the $600 to the book and processing budget, we can add a full 24 more books and increase circulation by about 150! The net gain in circulation is 140 with no change in total budget. Such costless gains in circulation are possible by reallocating between books and hours until the extra cost per added circulation is the same for books and hours. An experienced and watchful library manager, given a budget, should be able to balance changes in use against changes in cost to provide the most effective library service. That's an elemental feature of good management.

Of course, not all circulations have the same value, and public libraries usually have more uses than just circulation. The circulation of a valuable book of art prints probably should be viewed as worth more than circulation of a paperback gothic novel. Users may value using

some materials in the library and may value the reference services as they do the circulation services. Our rule — to seek as much circulation as possible — can be modified to a rule that says seek library services as valuable as possible to users. A rough and ready measure of use might sum up reference questions answered, in-library use, along with circulation. The balance between hours and books should then be struck so as to make as large as possible the usefulness of the library given its cost.

The Back Office and the Front Desk

Another important concern in the evaluation of library services is the balance between direct assistance to patrons at the information desk, often prominently placed near the front of the library, and the activities associated with selecting, ordering, cataloguing, and processing materials, often lodged in the back office. Just as banks without accounting and investment departments would not be effective, so too a library without the technical functions required to place and keep books on the shelves would not be effective.

The purchase of books is not a random process, but rather reflects the skill and effort of the library staff. Librarians can track the appearance of new titles and judge the titles' relevance to a library's expected users. They can search for valuable old titles, or even for extensive collections of previously owned books that may extend the usefulness of the library's collections. Librarians may also weed a collection, discarding books that are superseded by new editions or that are so out of date as to be of little future value. Because books in stock take space and require some care, housing a larger stock is costly. The value of a library collection, then, will reflect the energy and skill put in selecting and winnowing materials.

The chance that a user will find the most appropriate items is also affected by the library staff's efforts at cataloguing and shelving books. The effort put to these tasks can be considered in the same setting as the balance between hours and books: extra effort in selection and processing is well worthwhile up to a point. A catalogue normally allows finding things by author, title, and subject. The shelf arrangement usually allows finding similar things together to ease browsing and increase serendipitous discoveries. The more useful information is put in the catalogue and the more care given to accuracy, the more likely is a user to find just the right items. More effort put in creating the catalogue and in organizing the collection should increase the usefulness of the library. A library will be more valuable when such

organizing efforts are pursued to the point where the extra use generated is just worth the cost.

The technical activities should also be judged by the speed of acquisition and processing. Books tend to be most used when they are first published. One can think of the half life of a book as the earliest time interval when half of all the people who will ever read the book have read it. The half life of a book of fiction is thought to be about one year from publication. The half life for non-fiction may be two years. If a library lags several months after publication before ordering a book, and then keeps a book on hold for more months pending cataloguing and processing, the book will have spent the most valuable months of its useful life unavailable to the library's users. A library provides a much more valuable service when it orders many items within weeks of publication dates, perhaps even using some standing orders. The service is enhanced when materials are catalogued and processed quickly.

Many public libraries are transforming their procedures with electronic systems. These systems first came into play in larger libraries and library cooperatives. Now, many personal computer based systems are being adopted, systems that are suited for even small libraries. Electronic systems can manage the records for circulation, the information for the library's own catalogue, the accounting for library purchases, and the transactions associated with a library's ordering and processing of periodicals. The electronic systems also provide electronic entry to a much larger universe of library materials. Catalogues of distant libraries can be searched and materials for inter-library loan ordered electronically. A small library may benefit from participation in a cooperative arrangement that grants electronic access to a large catalogue of materials and provides some assured and rapid response to loan requests. When such cooperative links are in place, a community may want to rethink the question of the number of small neighborhood branches or local libraries versus the size of the regional centre. Effective and economical use of electronic systems can enhance the quality of library services. Of course, to be effective, such systems must be carefully managed.

Public versus School Libraries

Many schools and colleges have libraries to support their curricula. Would adding a little more operating money for weekend, evening, and summer hours yield a service that is a reasonable substitute for a public library? A few communities have attempted such, perhaps occasionally with satisfactory results.

In my judgement, such a combination is likely to work poorly. The school library must serve the school, its materials will be selected to serve the curriculum and faculty; its rules will be those that best fit the educational mission of the school. Just as our society has reaped great benefits from specialization in manufacturing, so too in libraries. An institution will have trouble being all things to all people. A school will properly focus its budget and managerial effort on educating its students. A public library will focus its budget and managerial effort on voluntary readers of all ages. Longer hours at a school library will be better than having no public library, but not as useful as having a public library.

Why have a Public Library?

Libraries are a symbol of civilization. They are the convenient repository of the human record, a staple source of recreation, an information bank for science, culture, and politics. A community can enrich itself with investments in well organized, effective public library services.

In deciding on public library services in a particular place, however, a community will want to consider carefully the costs of various ways of gaining access to the written record. A local library may be one solution. A branch of a larger library system may be a better alternative. A bookmobile stop or books-by-mail service may be best in some locations. Some communities may find library services too expensive. When people have better alternatives, a public library won't be desirable.

Delving into the issue more deeply, we recognize that public libraries should differ from place to place in the character of services offered. Some should be larger, some should offer more hours of service, some will emphasize service to small children, some will provide business reference services, a few may operate as adjuncts to schools. The question of "Why public libraries?" will be answered individually in each locality. When a community decides public library services are worth the cost, it will support taxes to provide services. The Province can influence a locality's decisions about public library services by providing services to local libraries and by a programme of grant support. How a locality answers the question, "Why a public library?", will then depend on the environment created by Provincial action as well as by the vigour of local support.

People want public libraries when they are convenient and economical ways of gaining access to the record of human experience. When public library services are useful, entertaining, and valuable for

decision making, citizens happily pay taxes to support library services. An effective public library will grow from the effort a community puts to its support. The quality of the library service will surely reflect the manager's skill in weighing the collection size and the number of hours of service to provide; in organizing the back office functions to assure rapid delivery of materials and effective use of electronic systems, and in matching collections and services to community desires. Provincial support can also make a difference. Successful public libraries reflect the best aspirations of local communities and the wise management of their librarians.